

# School gardens: a qualitative study on current practices in Flanders and recommendations for future projects’.

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**Purpose:** A school garden project is an experiential learning approach with beneficial effects on primary schoolchildren’s knowledge of and attitudes towards fruits and vegetables. However, there is a lack of research on teachers’ and children’s perceptions towards a school garden. This qualitative study examines the implementation of a school garden and the perceptions of teachers/responsible persons and children towards the implementation of their school garden.

**Methods:** A phenomenology approach was used. Twelve interviews with 14 teachers/responsible persons and five focus groups with 38 children from fifth or sixth grade (10-12 years old) were conducted in four primary schools in Ghent (Flanders, Belgium). The interviews and focus groups were analyzed in NVivo, using thematic analysis.

**Results:** School gardens were initiated to involve children in nature. Although teachers and children perceived positive effects on knowledge of and attitudes towards eating vegetables, they did not perceive effects on vegetable consumption. The practical use (e.g. the start-up, guidance during gardening, courses on gardening and use of the harvest) of the school garden was similar in the four schools and overall, teachers/responsible persons and children were very positive about having a garden at school. However, teachers/responsible persons experienced some problems in implementing the school garden, as external help is needed during the startup and someone internal needs to take responsibility for the garden. Furthermore, all schools experienced difficulties with the maintenance of the garden during summer holidays and the integration of the school garden in the core curriculum. Another problem was that the school gardens were too small to offer enough possibilities for all children to work in the garden and to use the harvest for feeding all children.

**Conclusions:** While school gardens can be initiated to involve children in nature, it is important to raise awareness on the potential positive effects on vegetable consumption in children. Furthermore, offering solutions to diminish the informational and organizational burden for teachers is needed. Finally, it may be important to involve parents in school gardening projects during the entire process of the school garden, since they play a major role in children’s health behavior.